Using commas with introductory and concluding phrases or clauses

The use of commas after introductory phrases and clauses moves us into the territory of choice. Heavy punctuators will use commas after nearly every introductory phrase or clause; light punctuators will try to use as few as possible, often using none. It is standard to use commas after rich or complex introductory material and to omit them after short introductory phrases. If you decide to omit commas, be sure the meaning of your sentence remains clear.

Concluding phrases and clauses are <u>not</u> punctuated with commas when they are restrictive or necessary to a complete understanding of the sentence. When they are non-restrictive, or may be de-emphasized, set them apart with commas.

Examples

1. *In the light of this new evidence*, we will need to reexamine the garage door.

2. *Whether or not the boys had been making a joke*, they now seemed to understand the gravity of their situation.

3. *On the driveway* they found an old weathered key.

4. *Long ago*, it had been used to secure a farmhouse *that belonged to the MacLean family*.

5. *After the catastrophic fire*, it had been removed by the family dog, *a schnauzer*.

Sample Sentences

Punctuate appropriately.

1. After a heated discussion about contemporary politics{,} Wally had fashioned a hole in the wall.

> **Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 2:57 PM**
> **Comment [1]:** The first seven sentences relate a true story that happened many, many years ago.

> **Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 2:27 PM**
> **Comment [2]:** Even light punctuators are likely to use a comma after these introductory phrases.

2. Having carefully examined the damage{,} Davis who was the fixit for the fraternity decided he would fix it.

Comment [3]: The comma after "damage" is standard. The relative clause should be treated as restrictive unless the author expects readers to know that Davis was the fixit or wants to de-emphasize that fact.

3. When he had gathered up newspaper, string, and plaster{,} he sat on a chair in front of the hole and filled it with wadded paper around which he had tied a loop of string.

Comment [4]: This introductory clause is complex enough to demand a final comma setting it apart from the clauses that follow.

4. Holding the string attached to the paper{,} Davis began to fill the remaining space with plaster.

5. When the plaster began to compress the paper{,} he pulled the string taut and maintained a flat surface.

6. The next day{,} he cut away the string from the dried plaster and smoothed the job with a final coat.

Comment [5]: Light punctuators would do without this comma, but its rhetorical effect – in effect marking the passing of time – is good reason to employ it.

7. To finish the task{,} all he needed to do was match the paint{,} a difficult job.

Comment [6]: The first comma is standard but often omitted. The second comma is necessary, marking the noun phrase "a difficult job" as a parenthetical aside.

The following sentences are incorrectly punctuated. In what way(s)?

8. Having served his town{,} faithfully and well{,} Grady was given a golden watch{,} at retirement.

> **Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 2:50 PM**
> **Comment [7]:** The argument might be made that "faithfully and well" is non-restrictive and thus can be set apart with commas, but it's a weak argument. The final comma muddles the meaning and impact of the sentence.

9. In the beginning there was light; then there was dark.

> **Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 2:52 PM**
> **Comment [8]:** I think this is fine as is. More aggressive punctuation, at once grammatical and rhetorical, might work as follows: "In the beginning, there was light; then, there was dark." More subtle punctuation: "In the beginning there was light; then, there was dark."

10. Because you never took a calculus course, you have missed{,} one of the joys of mathematics.

> **Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 3:00 PM**
> **Comment [9]:** This comma is incorrectly separating verb from its object.

11. Once again{,} Ken voiced his distaste for Johnson's only novel{,} *Rasselas.*

> **Tom Kinsella 1/29/11 3:00 PM**
> **Comment [10]:** The first comma may be omitted. Its effect, if used, is chiefly rhetorical. The comma after "novel" signals that *Rasselas* should be thought of as non-restrictive. Evidently, readers are expected to know that it is Johnson's only novel.